

Chapter 14

‘Please set your Eyeto to “pay”.’

Zola settled in the back seat of the taxi while Amandine flashed her Eyeto at the payment monitor.

‘Payment received. Thank you. Destination, please.’

She entered the address, gave Zola a kiss on the cheek and closed the door, leaving him alone in the vehicle.

‘Hello Passenger Smith. My name is Frank. Please now sit back and enjoy the ride. I don’t have any record of you riding with us before, but no matter. We welcome everyone.’

‘Hello Frank,’ said Zola. Frank was a smiling rator who sat at the steering wheel of the vehicle. It had no control over it whatsoever as it was entirely self-driven. It was in place because the public had a clear, oft-stated preference for taxis with a driver at the wheel, even if they knew the car was driving itself. It also gave passengers ‘someone’ to converse with.

‘Frank, what’s the weather like en route and across the region for this week and next?’ asked Zola.

‘The weather? Yes, certainly Mr Smith. In the city the rain is continuing to fall and is predicted to get much harder in coming hours...’

Zola stopped listening and focussed his mind on the object that felt like it was burning a hole in his tunic pocket. He knew he should abandon the dronikus immediately. It was simple, he could just leave it wedged in the seat of the taxi. Even if he strongly believed it was dormant, he was taking too great a risk. He gritted his teeth.

He wrapped his fingers around the dronikus and squeezed it. Through the window he could see the rain continue to bucket down while the rator-driver rambled on about the effects of warmer ocean currents on the climate in the tropics.

Zola could find no reason for keeping the dronikus. It was ridiculous; he had no wish to be reminded of the island. And yet it was only the fear that the dronikus was actually still functioning that made him consider getting rid of it.

He was here now – in a taxi ploughing through the rain and gushing waters in the overcrowded and crisis-riven metropolis – not on the island, not in exile.

He made his decision and reached his hand into the pocket once more. It would fit easily down the side of the seat and would probably remain hidden there for a long while.

However, just as he moved to pull the dronikus from his pocket that car stopped and the lights came on.

‘Here we are Mr Smith. Safe and sound. There seems to be shelter in front of that gate. Just a short dash and you’ll make it without getting very wet.’

It was too late; the opportunity was missed. Cameras would surely see if he tried to dump the dronikus in the taxi now.

Zola thanked Frank and left the car. He ran quickly through the rain, as the

taxi moved off down the road. He had been dropped at the complex's delivery entrance; there was less chance of being seen, Roberto had said.

He began to enter the gate code when a hand grabbed his shoulder. He spun round to see a hooded face.

'Zola, it's me,' in a whisper.

'Toto?'

'Shhh...come, we've got to go!' He took Zola's arm and urgently pulled him away. Sticking to the shadows, he guided him along the pavement through the pouring rain.

The night was dark. Zola and Roberto, wrapped together in a heavy poncho and cowering under an umbrella, moved along, buffeted by the rain and a strong wind. Despite the downpour and the late hour, many people were about, particularly as they entered the poorer quarters. They walked for a long time, avoiding people where they could. The rain hampered the movement of the surveillance dronikus and there was little evidence of patrolling rators. They were not stopped. Perhaps no alert had been posted for them as fugitives.

Vehicles and pedestrians moved cautiously through the rain and gushing waters. Dodging an overflowing drain, Roberto slipped on the pavement, hurting himself as he landed. He lay on the pavers, not moving until Zola helped him to his feet. He wrapped him in his arms, supported him, keeping him moving.

'How did you find out?' he asked.

'They left him there for everyone to see, in the corridor of the office, his body cut open, slashed,' Roberto said through his tears, 'and his face beaten.'

'Did you see him?'

Roberto sobbed, unable to reply.

Zola hugged him. 'Come, Toto, we must keep moving.' They inched forward.

'There was no blood, Zola. No blood. He was cut all over but there was no blood. He was just hunks of meat.' He stopped weeping but breathed with difficulty as he spoke. 'He told me yesterday... He said that she is at Sesanti.'

He started crying again, more loudly now. He stopped moving, hanging his head, his shoulders heaving. Zola pulled him up onto his back and made his way down the street. They neared the area where Zola and Chesa had walked earlier and into a network of smaller laneways, which were also crowded but with far fewer people in movement. Many recently arrived refugees and squatters had found shelter from the rain under the overhang of the buildings. Others had no cover, hunkering down as best they could on either side of the open drains, which ran like rivers in the centre of the narrow streets.

After going down one laneway and back up another, Zola stopped in an intersection, holding his Toto on his back, lashed by the rain and the wind, and having no idea of where he should go or what he should do. He looked up the crowded alleyways one after the other. 'It'll be alright, Toto, it'll be alright,' is all he could say, as he turned again, rainwater and tears streaming down his face.

Out the corner of his eye he glimpsed someone waving at him. It was an old woman. She sat next to a tiny brazier wrapped in a thick poncho, nestled among her belongings, sheltered under a building's overhang. Zola took a step towards her as she pulled her bags closer to her, making a small space on the paving stones. With relief, he eased Roberto down out of the rain alongside the woman, thanking her profusely.

A bundle of cloth was handed along the line of people crammed against the

wall. The woman propped it under Roberto's head as he lay on his back. Zola thanked the people, not even sure from whom the pillow had come.

Roberto began to breathe a little easier and Zola felt himself relax, even though both he and the old man shivered in their soaked clothing. The woman looked at Roberto, putting her hand on his chest, her lined face wrinkling to a smile: 'He be okay.'

Zola cradled Roberto's head in his lap, stroking his face, wiping his tears and softly reassuring him. They remained like this for some time, Zola glad to be still and protected to some degree from the elements. Roberto appeared to have found sleep of sorts, shivering and moving erratically on the hard cold stones. The old woman handed Zola a cup of steaming tea. He roused Roberto and helped him drink, allowing himself to relax just a bit, and take in all that had happened and was happening.

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He heard the woman take a sharp intake of breath. As he looked up she put her fingers to her lips and pointed. A dronikus was working its way along the groups of people huddled on the pavement. It moved from person to person, from face to face, hovering a moment, before moving to the next person.

Terror gripped Zola. He reached into his tunic pocket; thankfully the dronikus showed no sign of life. Roberto was sitting upright, his head slumped onto Zola's chest.

Unsure of what to do, Zola watched the dronikus's progress and how each person would look at it: generally with a defiant stare but making no moves to cover their face or turn away. This, he thought, was probably to avoid unduly attracting the dronikus's attention.

As it came closer still, Zola nudged Roberto and whispered, 'lie back and turn your face downwards, Toto.' But the old man was too far gone in his misery and discomfort to comprehend. Zola tried to ease him onto his back, but this only caused him to moan and resist. The dronikus came closer; it was a few metres away by now; the size of a large rat and a dowdy grey colour, an ugly creature. Zola

put his fingers to his face and massaged the skin into movement.

He wrapped his poncho over Roberto's head. The old woman waved her hand, indicating for him to remove it. Zola whispered in Roberto's ear, telling him what was happening. To his surprise the old man registered and sat up, looking about for the dronikus. On seeing it, he watched as it came towards them. Zola sat frozen, not knowing what to do.

'Toto, I... I... don't know...'

Roberto put his arms around Zola's body and said in a very low voice: 'I'll take care of this, Zola.'

'No.'

'Yes.'

He spoke quietly, holding the machine in his view. 'You make your way now, my boy, my dearest, dearest boy...'

Zola held his arm so tight that it might break. 'No, Toto...' the words falling soundlessly from his lips.

The dronikus hovered briefly in front of the old woman and then turned to Zola. He sat unmoving. He felt fear rise from his stomach up his spine and spread through his body. He looked deep into the Glastic eye fixed on him. But then it moved away and focussed on Roberto's face. Immediately it responded by pulling back sharply and hovering a few feet away from Roberto, locked onto him. Clearly it had found what it was looking for.

Nothing happened for a moment. Then Roberto struggled to his feet and began walking into the rain and the water gushing down the centre of the laneway. The dronikus followed, staying out of the rain under the overhang.

Zola stood up, his movements slow and deliberate. He touched the old

woman on her shoulder and edged away in the opposite direction. He kept his eyes ahead of him, resisting the desperate need he felt to look back. Roberto reached the centre of the intersection. He stopped and raised his eyes to the sky, a man at peace with his destiny.

As Zola reached the corner of the alley he turned and saw a dozen attack dronikus come flying into the laneway ahead of a squad of rators, moving rapidly towards Roberto. The dronikus fired a volley of darts and the old man dropped. Before he had even hit the ground, Zola had rounded the corner and was moving away.

He walked as fast as he dared, for fear of attracting attention, not sure where he was heading, stepping over and around the people huddled on the pavements. At the end of the alleyway, down an adjacent street, he saw activity. Squads of rators were moving through the squatters sheltering there, agitating and harassing them. Zola kept going, pulling the hood of his raincoat down tightly, walking even slower now, his head bowed, his hands in his tunic pockets. 'His' dronikus still lay snug and inert, enclosed in his fingers.

He had put a few streets between himself and the fatal intersection. The water, swirling and squalling as it fell from the sky, refracted and rippled through the streetlights, casting intricate patterns of fans and sprays and spirals in the air.

As he walked, his mind went to the brief glimpse he had of his beloved Toto being shot down by the dronikus. He stopped, crouching down against a wall, feeling the pain of the death and loss surge up through him. He wanted to close his eyes and give himself over to the suffering, but noises nearby made him look up. A group of rators was approaching in the distance, randomly attacking people on the pavements. Zola leapt to his feet and began walking again, rapidly up the street.

Many others were also on the move, getting out of the way of the aggressive machines.

The crowd, of which Zola had become a part, swelled – now perhaps in the hundreds – and began running onto the wider road alongside the river. They were soon overtaken and fell to the vicious batons and hard boots of the rators and the jaws of the rator dogs.

Zola broke away and slipped onto a small iron stairway leading down to the riverbank. He looked back and saw that a rator had seen him and was giving chase. Zola dropped as fast as he could, zigzagging down the flights. But as fast as he was, he heard the rator just above him clattering down the steel steps, gaining on him. On the next landing, he pulled back and straightened, the rator now entering the flight he had just left. As it arrived on the landing, Zola gave it a massive thrusting kick, pushing it off balance. It was quick, just missing Zola's foot but managing to grab the iron railing to save itself. However, the rusted old metal gave way under the robot's weight and the impact of Zola's kick. It came apart and the rator went flying out into the void and dropped down the 10 or 15 metres into the torrent below, where it was swept away in the rapid waters of the flooding river.

Zola made his way upstream on the narrow path along the riverbank, seeking shelter from both surveillance and the rain under trees, rocky overhangs, and bridges above him. He had no direction, with no idea of where to go, but he kept on moving.

Then, as exhaustion and a deep melancholy began to set in and his steps had become a slow shuffle, in the half-light his eyes caught a part of the roof and door of a self-drive van just visible above the black surging waters. Elated and re-energised, he ran up a stairway onto the road and then onto the familiar bridge.

He was forced to push aside people sleeping on the pavement to get to the door of Nazim's. He banged loudly until it was reluctantly opened a few inches by a man, both scared and angry. Zola persuaded him to call the boy and then persuaded the boy to go find Chesa.